

# The US Civil War as a Theological War: Confederate Christian Nationalism and the League of the South

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## Introduction

Formed in Alabama in 1994, the League of the South is a nationalist organization that advocates secession from the United States of America and the establishment of a fifteen-state Confederate States of America (CSA) – four states more than seceded during the US Civil War (1861–1865), the additional states being Oklahoma, Missouri, Kentucky, and Maryland (*Southern Patriot*). With over ten thousand members, the League professes a commitment to constructing this new CSA based on a reading of Christianity and the Bible that can be identified as “Christian nationalist.” This position is centred upon what we identify as the theological war thesis, an assessment that interprets the nineteenth-century CSA to be an orthodox Christian nation and understands the 1861–1865 US Civil War to have been a theological war over the future of American religiosity fought between devout Confederate and heretical Union states. In turn, this reasoning leads to claims that the “stars and bars” battle flag and other Confederate icons are Christian symbols and the assertion that opposition to them equates to a rejection of Christianity.

The theological war thesis originated in the Southern Presbyterian Church of the mid-nineteenth century, its advocates including Robert Lewis Dabney (1820–1898), professor at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia and Confederate General “Stonewall” Jackson’s army chaplain; James Henley Thornwell (1812–1862), President of South Carolina College, later professor at Columbia Theological Seminary; and Benjamin Morgan Palmer (1818–1902), founding editor of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, and later pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans. Following the Civil War, the Southern Presbyterian Church published biographies of and writings by Dabney, Thornwell, and Palmer. This work remained outside the more mainstream “Lost

Cause" apologetics for the Confederacy (see Pollard; Osterweis, *Romanticism and Myth*; Gallagher and Nolan). Thus, it comprised a marginal body of literature until Southern Agrarian Richard M. Weaver (1910–1963), Christian Reconstructionist Rousas John Rushdoony (1916–2001) and Presbyterian leader C. Gregg Singer (1910–1999) revived interest in these writings after World War II. Subsequently, Sprinkle Publications of Harrisonburg, Virginia, reprinted texts by Southern Presbyterian clergymen dating from the Civil War and postbellum period and academic historians, such as Eugene Genovese, reappraised these works in the 1980s and 1990s.

Utilizing original publications by nineteenth-century Presbyterians and Internet postings by the League of the South as the resources for our analysis, our explication will examine the roots and development of the theological war thesis. We argue that the theological war thesis originated in texts by theologians who between them contended that the Confederacy comprised an orthodox Christian nation, at times intertwining this religious viewpoint with, amongst other things, defences of slavery, denunciations of public education and mass schooling, and proposals to maintain a hierarchical and unequal society. There is not space to examine every publication in this chronology and tradition, although as other authors have pointed out, interpretations of Christianity and its connection to the Civil War and Biblical justifications for slavery are numerous (see *inter alia* Stanton; H. Smith; Wilson; Webster; Webster and Leib, "Whose South" and "Political Culture" ; Harrill; Genovese, *Slavery*, "James Thornwell," *Slaveholders' Dilemma*, *Southern Tradition*, "Marxism," "Religion," "Consuming Fire"; Farmer; Fox-Genovese and Genovese, *Religious Ideals*, "Divine Sanction," "Social Thought"; Miller, et al.).

Tracing the theological war thesis from its origins to the turn of the twenty-first century, we show how the belief that the Confederacy was an orthodox Christian nation has gained increasing circulation and acceptance. Once a marginal revisionist reading of the Civil War, we contend that groups as diverse as the Sons of Confederate Veterans heritage organization, Christian Reconstructionist bodies such as the Chalcedon Foundation, and the League of the South now generally accept the theological war thesis. Reaching a broad audience at conferences, through publications and on web sites, one of the League's founding directors, Steven Wilkins, continues to develop theological interpretations of the Civil War. Operating within this historical trajectory, therefore, the League of the South has utilized the theological war thesis to promote a Christian nationalist commitment to constructing a new Confederate States of America.

Interpretations of Christianity by the far right in the United States are numerous (e.g. Trelease; Chalmers; Wade; Barkun; D.H. Bennett; Bushart et al.), but the Christian nationalism of the neo-Confederate movement in general, and the League of the South in particular, have been little studied. Similarly, recent assessment of Confederate flag disputes has noted the League's presence but does not examine its wider theoretical, political, and religious worldviews (e.g. Webster; Webster and Leib, "Whose South" and "Political Culture"; Leib, "Heritage versus Hate" and "Teaching Controversial Topics"). Therefore, in this article we explore how the message currently promoted by the League of the South revives mid-nineteenth-century Confederate writings that understood the US Civil War to be a theological war between Northern heresy and Southern orthodox Christianity.

### The League of the South

The League of the South was founded on June 25, 1994 in Tuscaloosa, Alabama and held its first national convention in Charleston, South Carolina five months later (Sebesta 55-84; "Southern League News"; Hodges). By 2000, the League counted over 9000 members, having ninety-six chapters in twenty states (Southern Poverty Law Center). In March 2000, police estimated between 2000 and 3000 participants at the group's "Declaration of Cultural Independence" rally in Montgomery, Alabama (Hall and Roston; Reeves). In addition to its "Dixienet" web site (see McPherson), the League supports the political action web sites Free Alabama and Free Mississippi, and administers an Institute for the Study of Southern Culture and History. The League publishes a bimonthly newsletter, *Southern Patriot*, and distributes numerous video and audio cassettes about the history and development of the United States. Members participate in lectures, conferences, summer schools, and an annual convention. Concisely summarizing some of the organization's key beliefs on its Dixienet web site, the League's president since its foundation, Michael Hill, recently stated:

Why do the left-liberals rage against the 'traitorous' South and its traditional culture and symbols? The stock answer has been because all that the South stands for - orthodox Christianity, honor, hierarchy, loyalty to place and kin, patriarchy, and respect for the rule of law - represents an obstacle to the left-liberals' lust for power. This is a correct assessment, but it is only one side of the coin .... The treason of the Left involves such unconstitutional and immoral enormities as globalism - the selling-out of American national sovereignty to international agencies and interests; radical egalitarianism; feminism; sodomite rights; abortion; Third-World immigration; gun control; hate crime leg-

isolation (always meant to be used against whites); judicial tyranny; burdensome taxation; multiculturalism and diversity (code words for anti-white, anti-Christian bigotry); the universal rights of man; and other manifestations of a new brand of politically-correct totalitarianism. (*Treason* n. pag.)

Although not initially defining itself as a religious movement, from the outset the League of the South postulated the idea of an orthodox Christian South. Its manifesto pledges to "Defend the historic Christianity of the South," advocating the creation of an orthodox Christian nation-state (Hill, "Christian Southerners"; Murphy). In his essay "Christian Southerners," Michael Hill declares that since its inauguration the League has pushed for "the establishment of a republic based on the Christian principles of our Confederate ancestors" (1). Further, Hill argues that Christianity was as central to the Confederacy during the Civil War as "Lee, Jackson, Stuart, and Davis" (1). Claiming to continue this Confederate tradition, Hill states that his organization represents "true Southerners" who comprise an "Orthodox Christian" people ("Montgomery" 20). The League thus characterizes its present struggle for Southern independence as a confrontation between Southern Christian principles, which they themselves represent, and anti-Christian positions argued to be those of the United States mainstream (Hill, "Montgomery" 20). The League instructs its members that the Civil War was a theological war between the Christian South and the heretical North that resulted from a wider ongoing American national conflict between orthodox Christianity and heresy that continues to this day (see Wilkins, *Theology*; Woods, *Copperheads*). Hill identifies Confederate heroes as "uncompromising defenders of the orthodox Christian faith," and interprets the Confederate battle flag as a symbol of Christianity and Western civilization ("Christian Southerners" 1, "Real Symbolism"). Opposition to the Confederate States of America is thus interpreted as a rejection of Christianity, a stance reiterated by Hill, who explains: "we intend, God willing, to advance the traditions of the Christian South against the secularising and globalising trends of the modern age" ("What a Way" 2). The cause of the Confederacy is both reconfirmed and maintained by the League of the South as a strategy to secure Christianity in the United States against perceived current threats.

The position promoted by the League of the South at the turn of the twenty-first century that the South is a Christian nation under threat is not new. Many of these sentiments originated in the mid-nineteenth century and, in the following section, we review some of these historical precedents.

James Henley Thornwell, Benjamin Morgan Palmer, Robert Lewis Dabney and the Origins of the Theological War Thesis

During and after the US Civil War, several prominent Southern clergymen defined the conflict and political debate with abolitionists as a theological struggle between Christian orthodoxy and anti-Christian forces, the former comprising the Confederacy, the latter referring to the Union. Many clergymen in the South supported secession, delivering sermons and producing pamphlets championing the Confederacy (Snay; Wakelyn; Fox-Genovese and Genovese, "Social Thought"). Within the clergy, however, historians Simkins and Roland argue that it was members of the Presbyterian denomination who were widely considered to be "the intellectual elite among Southern churchmen" (158). Presbyterian chaplains including South Carolina Theological Seminary Professor James Henley Thornwell, New Orleans Presbyterian minister Benjamin Morgan Palmer and Confederate pastor Robert Lewis Dabney engaged in reviews of the Civil War from a theological perspective. Often published by the presses of the Presbyterian Church, a body of literature developed that asserted the Civil War had been an attack on a Christian South by heretical and atheistic forces of the North. Some contemporaries in the Presbyterian Church condemned this position. For example, Robert Livingston Stanton (1810–1885), Professor in the Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church at Danville, Kentucky at the time of the Civil War, states Thornwell gave "eloquent voice to the cause of treason" and that Palmer also was articulate in his support for slavery, secession and, thus, "treason" (161, 171). Others, in contrast, supported the stances taken by Presbyterian leaders like Thornwell and Palmer, such as Frederick A. Ross (1796–1883), a Presbyterian minister in Tennessee and Alabama for over fifty years (Ross n.pag.; Rogers 112–124).

Texts by Thornwell and Palmer, many of which have recently regained scholarly attention (see, *inter alia*, Genovese; Farmer), are amongst those that became key elements in the theorization of a Christian Confederate nation and the theological war thesis. Between 1871 and 1873 the Presbyterian Committee published the complete works of James Henley Thornwell and in 1875 a secular press distributed Benjamin Morgan Palmer's biography of Thornwell (Thornwell; Palmer). In turn, Johnson's biography of Palmer reproduced the New Orleans chaplain's 29 November 1860 Thanksgiving sermon, given in Louisiana three weeks before South Carolina became the first state to secede. Here Palmer argued that slavery "has fashioned our modes of life, and determined all our habits of thought and feeling, and moulded the very type of our civilization" and further explained that it was a religious duty to "defend the cause of God and

religion" and, in particular, "to conserve and to perpetuate the institution of domestic slavery" (qtd. in Johnson, *Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer* 209-210). Condemned by Robert Livingston Stanton as being "steeped in sin, guilt, and crime" for its exhortation of secession to maintain slavery, Palmer's sermon subsequently became a central text of the theological war thesis (169).

Many contemporaries of Thornwell and Palmer sought to assert that the Confederate soldier was more pious than his Union counterpart. For example, Confederate chaplain William W. Bennett explained in 1876 that the Confederate soldiers he observed were Christians and contrasted Bible-reading Confederate troops with card-playing Union soldiers. Further, Bennett noted that the "religious sentiments" of Confederate supporters were "deep and strong" and that amongst the troops, "there have been fewer departures from the great cardinal doctrines of the Scriptures than among any other people in Christendom" (23). Both Bennett and another Confederate chaplain J. William Jones who served under Robert E. Lee, composed catalogues detailing a revival of Christianity throughout the Confederate army. Although these texts do not advocate that theology was the main issue of the war, they became important sources of evidence for subsequent authors to maintain that in contrast to the Union, the Confederate States comprised a nation of Christians.

Arguably the most significant early advocate of a theological perspective of the Civil War was Robert Lewis Dabney, who has been described by Simkins and Roland as a clergyman who, "[f]or three decades after the fall of the Confederacy in lectures and in books ... energetically expounded the dogma that ... the Civil War was a Christian struggle of a justified South against a wicked North" (405). In 1865 Dabney published *The Life and Campaigns of Lieut. Gen. Thomas J. Jackson (Stonewall Jackson)*, in which he argued for secession, states' rights and described some Civil War campaigns. The primary purpose of this text was to extol Jackson as a Confederate hero and an extremely pious Presbyterian Christian soldier. Soon after, Dabney wrote on the theological meaning of the Civil War in *A Defense of Virginia and Through Her of the South*. Utilizing Biblical passages to defend slavery and refute abolitionist arguments, he claimed that slavery was a necessary good for what he called the "depraved" lower classes. Dabney asserted in support for Confederate secession that "it is only the relation of domestic slavery as authorized by God, that we defend" (*Defense* 99). Further denouncing abolitionism as "infidel" and "anti-scriptural," Dabney believed that the Bible legitimated slavery, and thus opposition to slavery was tantamount to rejecting Christianity (*Defense* 22; see also H. Smith).

Shortly before his death in 1898, Dabney's works were collected into four volumes and published by the Presbyterian Committee of Richmond, Virginia. Throughout his work, the minister condemned human equality and women's rights as leading to the destruction of the family and, thereafter, of society. Dabney also attacked the immorality of Union soldiers in the Civil War, opposed public schooling (especially of African-Americans) and honoured Confederate leaders, justifying all his positions by Biblical interpretation. In the essays "Geology and the Bible" and "A Caution Against Anti-Christian Science," for example, Dabney challenged that modern science and development of the theory of evolution were "anti-theological" and that amongst future generations this would result in "a nascent contempt for their father's Bibles" and irreparably damage the South's "Christian households" ("Caution" 118, 122). He further contended that governments were legitimate only if they derived from the will of God ("Civic Ethics" 303-305). Dabney wrote prolifically, regularly commenting on philosophical and theological topics and was consistently, and virulently, hostile towards African-Americans. If allowed social equality in the South, Dabney argued, African-Americans would "mix the blood of the heroes of Manassas with this vile stream from the fens of Africa" which would weaken the genealogical purity of Confederate blood and thus reduce the once heroic Virginians to a position of servility (*Defense* 353). Subject of a biography in 1903 (Johnson), by the end of his life, Simkins and Roland assert, Dabney was afforded "[l]ittle attention" by his contemporaries, being an advocate of archaic conceptualizations of "chivalry and religious conservatism" (7).

Restricted largely to Southern Presbyterian venues, this "theological war" literature was less significant in popular politics than more general Lost Cause apologetics (e.g. Pollard). Yet, since the mid-1960s conservative scholars and activists, at times operating within religious circles, have re-evaluated and republished these marginal writings. Indeed, in a recent preface to Dabney's *The Practical Philosophy*, Douglas F. Kelley, Professor of Theology at the Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina, identifies the nineteenth-century theologian as a "prophet [who] foresaw the life and death struggle that would take place between secular totalitarianism and Christian liberty in America in the latter part of the twentieth century" (n. pag.). As the comment by Kelley suggests, a trajectory from Southern Presbyterian conservative authors such as Dabney to others writing in the late twentieth century can be ascertained and it is to this, therefore, that we now turn.

Richard M. Weaver, C. Gregg Singer, Rousas John Rushdoony and the Revival of the Theological Civil War in the 1940s-1960s

Dabney and the other Southern Presbyterians were largely forgotten as the twentieth century progressed and an industrial "New South" developed. Following the 1925 Scopes Trial and the 1929 Wall Street Crash, however, scholars began to question the viability of the South's cultural and economic position and many looked to alternative models of Southern society. King argues that an "anti-New South spirit" pervaded intellectuals including John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, and Robert Penn Warren who felt that attacks on Southern religiosity during the 1925 trial over the teaching of theories of evolution in public schools were unjustified (53). One result was publication of the symposium *I'll Take My Stand* in 1930 by this reactionary group who became known as "Southern Agrarians" (King). In this text, contributors looked back to and defended conservative traditions of the South. Their initial essay, "A Statement of Principles," argues that "[r]eligion can hardly expect to flourish in an industrial society" because religious faith involves submission to God's creation of nature and industrialization simplifies nature, turning it into commodities and rendering it artificial (xxiv). To the Southern Agrarians, the regeneration of a religious South mandated a rolling back of the industrialization that occurred in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Although not a contributor to this volume, Richard M. Weaver (1910–1963) is associated with the Southern Agrarians because he espoused a conservative philosophy, anti-Modernism, and was connected to leaders of the movement such as Ransom and Davidson while at Vanderbilt University (Kreyling; Malvasi, *Unregenerate South*). In particular, Weaver's posthumously published work focused on the South, constructing it as a pious agrarian region standing in opposition and contradiction to a modern industrial North (e.g. *Southern Tradition at Bay*, *Southern Essays*).

In 1943 Weaver outlined his contention that the Civil War was a clash between an orthodox Christian South and a heretical North, asserting that

Southern people reached the eve of the Civil War one of the few religious people left in the Western World. Into the strange personnel of the Confederate Army ... poured fighting bishops and prayer-holding generals, and through it swept waves of intense religious enthusiasm long lost to history. ("Older" 248)

Weaver further explained that the Confederate military was a Christian army, claiming that, "Confederate captains not only were conscious of being the standard bearers of chivalry; they also regarded themselves as distinctly a Christian soldiery" (*Southern Tradition at Bay* 208). Thus establishing that there was a theological dimension to the Civil War, and



focusing on the Confederate army and “Southern people” as “distinctly ... Christian,” Weaver’s work facilitated a revival of theological examinations of the Civil War and serves as a connection between the modern neo-Confederate movement and the Southern Agrarians of the 1930s (see Genovese, *Southern Tradition*; Malvasi, *Unregenerate*; Landess; Bradford, *Remembering*). Indeed, Kreyling identifies just such a trajectory extending from the Agrarians and Weaver to Michael Hill and the League of the South (178).

Following Weaver, others revisited the interpretation that the Civil War was a theological war. One of these was C. Gregg Singer (1910–1999), a professor at the Atlanta School of Biblical Studies in 1977 and, after 1987, at the Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary (Singer, *Theological*; F.J. Smith 65). Writing during the Civil Rights era, Singer explicitly contended that the Civil War was a theological war between a Christian orthodox South and a Unitarian heretical North, stating that the

Southern Presbyterian Church saw [the US Civil War] as a humanistic revolt against Christianity and the world and life view of the Scriptures ... Thornwell, Dabney, and their contemporaries ... properly read abolitionism as a revolt against the biblical conception of society and a revolt against the doctrine of divine sovereignty in human affairs. (*Theological* 86–87)

As the leader of Concerned Presbyterians, Inc., a dissident faction that condemned heresy in the Southern Presbyterian Church, Singer played a prominent role in establishing the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) as a distinct denomination in the 1970s. Distancing the PCA from other Presbyterians in the United States, this organization envisaged itself as a successor to the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (PCCSA), a denomination that had also formed in response to perceived heresy. Positioning itself to be the legitimate inheritor of the PCCSA legacy and that of its leading theologian James Henley Thornwell, whose writing the PCA reprinted, the PCA drew a direct connection between their denomination and the PCCSA stating an intent to “follow the pattern of the Assembly of 1861” (Richards 227; Winter; F. Smith). Singer further claimed that the PCA continued a legacy dating beyond the PCCSA to “Old School” Presbyterian orthodoxy (“Story” 3–6).<sup>1</sup>

As Singer was working to establish the PCA and its historical connections, another religious leader was arguing for the Christian orthodoxy of the antebellum South. Rousas John Rushdoony (1916–2001), founder of the Chalcedon Foundation in 1965, initiated the Christian Reconstructionist movement in the United States that advocates the establishment of

Biblical republics under the rule of God's law or "theonomy." The people who would administer these republics would be those whom Christian Reconstructionists considered to have correctly orthodox interpretations of Christianity and would, amongst other things, introduce capital punishment for myriad offences (Clarkson; M.R. Rushdoony). Rushdoony argued that the early American Republic was a decentralized Protestant feudal system and an orthodox Christian nation that was destroyed by the Civil War (*Nature* 4–6). Union victory, in Rushdoony's interpretation, was a defeat for Christian orthodoxy and paved the way for the rise of an unorthodox Social Gospel in the postbellum United States. Elsewhere, Rushdoony has condemned public education and contended that the Civil War was not about slavery, but the consolidation and centralization of federal government power (*This Independent Republic* 71, 111). Rushdoony has also attacked the current US electoral system as giving too much influence to minority groups and argued that US society should have a civic order based on inequality and social division (*Nature* 13).

By the mid-1960s, therefore, Weaver, Singer, and Rushdoony had to varying degrees reasserted that the Confederate states fought to preserve orthodox Christianity in the face of Union abolitionism and that the Civil War was a theological war over the future direction of the United States. Publishing at the height of the struggle for Civil Rights in the United States, these authors argued that civil rights were anti-Christian, that inequality is God's intended order, and they drew on Thornwell, Dabney, and their contemporaries to provide a historical and religious justification for this position. The role of these men in wider conservative and Christian Reconstructionist groups resulted in their proposals finding a broad audience amongst the religious right in the United States. Through these networks, advocates of "orthodox" Christianity began to converge with supporters of Confederate nationalism and as leaders of pro-Confederate and "orthodox" Christian organizations likely began to recognize that their mutual aims could unify supporters into larger, more active groups, the thesis of a theological war continued to widen its appeal.

### Republishing Southern Presbyterian Confederate Writings in the 1970s

Describing the beginning of his publishing business to Byron Snapp in *Southern Partisan*, Lloyd Sprinkle explained that in 1975, following a conversation with a Presbyterian pastor who asked him for a copy of Robert Lewis Dabney's *Life and Campaigns of Stonewall Jackson*, he decided to reprint titles that were long out of print. Selling 2000 copies of Dabney's biography of Jackson within a year, and 30,000 by 1994, Sprinkle today

continues to receive orders from throughout the United States and has since reprinted numerous other works by Confederate Southern Presbyterians including Thornwell and Palmer. Simultaneously, Banner of Truth Trust based in Edinburgh, Scotland and Carlisle, Pennsylvania also reissued many of these titles (see Appendix). Praising them in reviews, Rousas John Rushdoony recommended these reprinted editions in Chalcedon Foundation publications. For example, Rushdoony applauded Dabney's defence of slavery and an anonymous reviewer of William W. Bennett's *Great Revival* stated in *Chalcedon Report* that, "What is now needed is a historical study of the Christian efforts at reconstruction which men like Robert E. Lee, and countless other veterans, then began" ("Book Notices" n. pag.).

Rushdoony's promotion of Sprinkle's reprints brought them to the attention of the wider Christian Reconstructionist movement in the United States. The republication and promotion of these Southern Presbyterian Confederate works led to their discussion and review in magazine articles, books, audio cassettes, videotape sets, and other pro-Confederate theological and political venues. By the end of the 1970s, therefore, Sprinkle, Rushdoony and others had republished and reinterpreted the historical record and, based on the evidence of a few atypical nineteenth-century texts, claimed the 1861-1865 Confederate army to be populated by theologically driven Christian Reconstructionists fighting to preserve their orthodox Christian nation against heretical Union troops. Subsequently, the higher profile of these nineteenth-century authors, particularly James Henley Thornwell, attracted academic attention.

### Towards a Theological Metaphysics of the Confederacy: Academic Writings in the 1980s and 1990s

In a *Southern Partisan* interview in 1985, the prominent American historian Eugene Genovese announced that his research was increasingly focused on religion in the Old South. Proposing some of the ideas that would occur in subsequent publications, Genovese drew upon conservative scholars such as Weaver to argue, "the Old South should be understood fundamentally as a religious society" in which "the defense of slavery was religiously grounded" ("Partisan Conversation" 37-38). Starting with a reappraisal of Thornwell, Genovese contended that "Thornwell's defense of slavery may be seen as an extended footnote to his defense of Christian orthodoxy" and thus must be seen as part of a wider theological perspective and understanding of the South and the Civil War (Foreword ix). Presenting Thornwell to readers in a review of "[t]he God-fearing, Bible reading, hymn-singing Confederate army,"

Genovese assesses Southern conservative thought in which "a straight line runs from him [Thornwell] to the Agrarians" ("James Thornwell" 17, 21).

Previous academic assessment of Confederate Presbyterian theologians had been sporadic (see, *inter alia*, Bishop; Rogers; H. Smith), but Genovese's intervention and James Oscar Farmer's award-winning re-assessment of Thornwell's *The Metaphysical Confederacy*, stimulated further re-examinations of such "formidable southern theologians" (Genovese "Marxism" 91, *Slaveholders' Dilemma*, *Southern Tradition*, and *Consuming Fire*; Farmer; Freehling).<sup>2</sup> Pertinent to these analyses were three major themes: the theological Civil War and contrast between orthodox Christian South and non-orthodox North; re-evaluations of modernity from the perspectives of Thornwell and his contemporaries; and, complaint about the neglect of Southern intellectual history. To give a brief example of each, Genovese asserts the centrality of Christian orthodoxy in the antebellum period, suggesting that the consequence was inevitable political division between Union and Confederacy:

The political ramifications of southern Christian theology were enormous. For at the very moment that the northern churches were embracing theological liberalism and abandoning the Word for a Spirit increasingly reduced to personal subjectivity, the southern churches were holding the line for Christian orthodoxy. ("Marxism" 92)

In turn, Farmer suggests that today's Americans with their "collective anxieties about the kind of civilization we have created" can admire the Old South (3). Further, for Genovese, Farmer's assessment of Thornwell, "clears away a great deal of the rubbish that has long distorted the writing of southern history... put[ting] to rest the bias and silliness that declare the intellectual history of the Old South inferior to that of the North" (Foreword vii). Alongside advocating a theological basis for the Civil War, Genovese's recent analyses imply that this conflict continues to have relevance to late-twentieth-century society (see, for example, "Religion"). Pre-empting criticism of this suggestion as being continued anti-Southern bias in US historical scholarship, Genovese asserts that Presbyterian thinkers such as Thornwell and Palmer who tried to balance demands for progress with orthodox Christianity and a hierarchical social order dominate the Southern intellectual tradition (see *Slaveholders' Dilemma* and *Southern Tradition*). Extending his "straight line" of Southern thought to the late twentieth century, Genovese identifies conservative historians including M.E. Bradford, John Shelton Reed, and Clyde Wilson, a League of the South director, as intellectual inheritors of and successors to "the Southern Tradition," as are publications *Southern Partisan*

and *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*, the latter edited by another League of the South director, Thomas Fleming (see Genovese's *Southern Tradition* and *Southern Front*).

Arguing that Marxism fails to adequately address religious interpretations of history and that Marx misrepresented the Civil War and the South, Genovese becomes more explicit in his acceptance of the theological war thesis, stating that although "it remains commonplace to assume that no honest Christian could be a slaveholder, much less regard slavery as a divinely sanctioned institution," nineteenth-century Southern slaveowners were Christians who believed slavery was Biblically acceptable and thus the abolitionist declaration that slavery was a sin, "was a call to holy war" ("Religion" 74-75; "Marxism"). As a result of such differing theological interpretations of the sinfulness of slavery, argues Genovese, "southerners and northerners were emerging as separate peoples," a division that induced the Civil War ("Religion" 75). Genovese proceeds to appraise the theological Civil War thesis, repeating that the North was succumbing to heresy while the South retained orthodox Christianity. Quoting Thornwell's assertion that rather than abolitionists opposing slaveholders during the Civil War the major division was radicals against Christians, a quotation repeated in *Southern Partisan* in 1996 (see below), Genovese concludes with a theological interpretation of the Civil War as a "holy war" because "northerners and southerners ... disagreed on the essentials of Christian doctrine and morality" and, as a result, "held incompatible visions of ... social relations" ("Religion" 84). Indeed, Genovese suggests Thornwell and his contemporaries may have been correct in their interpretation of US society:

The free market, especially the market in labor power, with its radical individualism and rejection of all forms of slavery, provided the northern counterpart to the Abramic household envisioned by proslavery southerners. Soon enough, the Confederacy did in fact face the wrath of God, or at least the wrath of the Yankees, but we may wonder if Thornwell, Palmer, Pierce, and other southerners who pushed for an official Christian Confederacy did not have the last grim laugh. For they had warned that if the Union, based on free labor, the marketplace, and radical democracy, prevailed the ground would be cut from under the churches - that, inexorably, political and social democracy would generate overwhelming pressures for ecclesiastical democracy and, through it, for theological liberalism and eventual unbelief. Southerners insisted that the dissolution of the family, the collapse of social order, and the repudiation of any concept of legitimate authority must inexorably proceed in step with the eclipse of Christian orthodoxy, which could be sustained only by organic social relations. We may breathe a sigh of relief at the defeat of their proslavery cause. But from

our vantage point of our own day, can we, in all honesty, pretend that they had not in fact read the sign of the times? ("Religion" 82)

In this and in his other work on the topic, which there is not space here to review fully, Genovese infers the existence of an antebellum orthodox Christian South and seeks to explore how white elites theologically interpreted slavery and defeat of the Confederacy. Further, Genovese notes that he must "bypass the black religious experience" despite its "considerable impact" on such questions ("Religion" 84). In the past fifteen years, therefore, Genovese and Farmer, amongst others, appraise theological interpretations of Southern history and have arguably rehabilitated pro-slavery Christian theologians of the mid-nineteenth century. Their central focus on Thornwell is advantageous as, having died in 1862, he did not leave a postbellum legacy of vividly racist writings as Dabney and Palmer did (Haynes). Consequently, we suggest that bringing the ideas of Thornwell and, to a lesser extent, Palmer and Dabney, into mainstream historical venues implies scholarly sanction of the theological war thesis.

#### The Theological War in the 1990s: Steven Wilkins and the League of the South

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In the last quarter of the twentieth century the theological war thesis and its associated advocacy of a Confederate Christian Southern nationalism found its appeal growing not only within academic discussion, but also in Confederate heritage venues such as *Southern Partisan* magazine and conservative religious publications such as *Chalcedon Report*. Since its interview with Genovese and publication of his interpretations of Thornwell's thought in the mid-1980s, *Southern Partisan* regularly outlined the theological Civil War and orthodox Christian South theses. For example, a 1991 essay by the prominent conservative historian and pioneer of the current neo-Confederate movement, M.E. Bradford, portrayed the Confederate military as a Christian army and their enemies as heretics. Bradford explained: "in defeat and in the bondage of enemy occupation, Southerners could think of themselves as people called out to a special witness, a righteous nation surviving in the midst of modernity, sealed forever in its covenant by defeat and freedom from the besetting ambitions of the victorious, progressive North" (*Theology* 25). Indeed, such became the prominence of theological interpretations of the Civil War within neo-Confederate circles that League of the South member and professor of History at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia, Mark Malvasi recently argued that the contention that the antebellum South was an orthodox Christian nation is "axiomatic," before proceeding to maintain that current US society is failing due to a lack of Christian faith (*Christianity* 30).

Replicating these arguments, Christian Reconstructionist authors such as Joseph C. Morecraft, have drawn upon nineteenth-century Southern Presbyterian sources and others reviewed above, particularly Dabney and Weaver, to promote the theological war thesis and maintain that during the Civil War a heretical North attacked a Christian South (Morecraft "Maddest," "Dabney"). Such an opinion marks a significant shift in the editorial position of the *Chalcedon Report*. In a 1996 issue devoted to the Civil War, the Chalcedon Foundation balanced articles that promoted neo-Confederate viewpoints, including comment by League of the South director Steven Wilkins, with those opposing them. Five years later, following a series of articles solely supportive of neo-Confederate perspectives, Steven Wilkins castigated Barry Anderson, a dissenter who criticized the presence of neo-Confederate essays in *Chalcedon Report*. Wilkins joked that Anderson was unable to think clearly, perhaps after "being trapped in a mob of half-crazed females at the shopping mall" (Anderson and Wilkins 26). Recent support by the Chalcedon Foundation for the League of the South's Christian nationalism is also evident in the fact that it recently posted the League's March 2000 "Declaration of Southern Cultural Independence" on its web site. In this Declaration, Steven Wilkins and his colleagues state:

The national culture of the United States is violent and profane, coarse and rude, cynical and deviant, and repugnant to the Southern people and to every people with authentic Christian sensibilities.... they have called good evil and evil good; they have everywhere substituted the opinions of men for the decrees of God. (4)

Collaboration between the Christian Reconstructionist movement and the League of the South has also increased, evidencing a growing overlap in the historical, political and theological perspectives of participants in both organizations. This indicates a conflation of conservative, neo-Confederate and Christian nationalisms into a potent reinterpretation of United States history, one centred upon the thesis that the Confederate states were a bastion of orthodox Christianity standing in the face of the heretical Union states. For example, Otto Scott, a regular contributor to both *Chalcedon Report* and *Southern Partisan*, has argued that civil rights and anti-apartheid activists detrimentally re-enact abolitionist policies and that nineteenth-century Transcendentalism was a heretical philosophy followed by the Union during the Civil War (see "Transcendentalism," "Heresy," *Lifeboat, Secret*). Such opinions enabled Scott to speak at the League of the South's second annual National Conference (held 2-3 June 1995) and co-produce video sets outlining neo-Confederate political, theological and historical interpretations of the Civil War with League of the South directors Steven Wilkins and Clyde Wilson.

In addition to his role as a director of the League of the South, Steven Wilkins is arguably the most prominent member of the current neo-Confederate clergy. A member of the PCA, and resident instructor at the R.L. Dabney Center for Theological Studies based in Monroe, Louisiana, Wilkins writes for almost all the religious publications and groups that advance neo-Confederate and Christian nationalist ideas, interpreting the historical development of the United States as following a heretical trajectory that culminated in the defeat of the Christian Confederate states in the Civil War. Wilkins asserts, in a manner reminiscent of Genovese's assessment, that the cause of the Civil War was theological incompatibility between North and South, the former having "rejected Biblical Calvinism" (Wilkins, *America* 142). "[T]he War Between the States," Wilkins contends, was "a true revolution. The foundations of western culture were being broken up and overthrown ... Their purpose was not merely to destroy slavery ... but to destroy Southern culture" ("Southern Culture" pt. I, 11). Wilkins continues, claiming, "There was radical hatred of Scripture and the old theology [and] Northern radicals were trying to throw off this Biblical culture and turn the country in a different direction" ("Southern Culture" pt. I, 11). The ultimate result of the Civil War, concludes Wilkins, was a Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution (ratified 1868) that trampled States' rights and created an overly powerful and unconstitutional Federal government because it gave citizenship to freed slaves and guaranteed that Federal rather than State government protected the rights of all citizens (*America* 150). Elsewhere, Wilkins has defended slavery and the discriminatory Reconstruction era "Black Codes" of Southern states (e.g., *America* 136–137, 148). Writing with Douglas Wilson, Wilkins has claimed that "the Word of God" and Biblical Christian orthodoxy are currently threatened by feminism, gay and lesbian rights, and legalized abortion (11). To shield Christianity from these perceived threats, Wilkins and Wilson utilize a theological analysis that leads them to simultaneously build an argument that defends slavery as Biblically justified. In turn, Wilkins has maintained that, "The War Between the States was a war between two different world views: The old way of Biblical Constitutionalism and the 'new' way of Humanistic Centralism" and, therefore, slavery was a mere "pretext" used by the Union to force the South into "political subjugation and economic destruction" (*America* 138).

Wilkins also writes for the Chalcedon Presbyterian Church, recently reassessing Dabney's works, arguing that Confederate leaders are ideal role models of Christian masculinity, and reiterating the theological war thesis (e.g. "Dabney's 'Defense of Virginia'" and *Character*). Lamenting that the modern Southerner is failing the South and Christianity because



"things which once marked the South are no longer present," Wilkins decries:

[t]he erosion of Biblical Christianity that has occurred over the last century has left the South a bare shadow of its former self. Many Southerners are now realizing what has been lost in cultural terms but fail to realize the true cause for this loss. It has not been caused by the opposition of the liberals ... It has been caused by the rejection of the historic Christian Faith of the Reformation. (*Christianity* 13)

The solution to this lack of orthodox Christian faith, for Wilkins, is that residents of the South recover their religious tradition and reinstate this in a revived Confederate States of America. Indeed, Wilkins is optimistic about this proposal, perhaps signaling the growing popularity and power of neo-Confederate and Christian orthodox movements at the end of the twentieth century:

Until only a few years ago, it looked as if the vision of the fathers of this nation had died out completely and the legacy of reconstruction would be our nation's epitaph. Today, there are hopeful signs that God's people are waking up to the call of restoring true liberty in Christ to this nation and all its institutions. (*America* 150)

In the 1990s, therefore, through increased collaboration between Confederate heritage and Christian Reconstructionist groups, many of which counted the same people as members, the theological war thesis became a standard position in the mainstream Confederate nationalist movement which centred upon the League of the South following its formation in 1994. Consequently, the League of the South became active in debates over the locations of Confederate flags in the late 1990s. One of the bitterest contests occurred at the South Carolina Capitol (Webster and Leib 271–299). On 11 December 1996 at a South Carolina meeting of Christian ministers, Baptist Bobby Eubank spoke in support of the Confederate flag's position above the state's Capitol ("Baptist Convention" 5). Subsequently published as a paper titled, "The Moral Defense of the Confederate Flag: A Special Message for South Carolina Christians," the oration was distributed at religious meetings (Gaulden A1; Young B1). It was also reprinted in *Southern Partisan* where the authors were described as "Fifteen Ministers" – a deliberate evocation of the 1863 address by ninety-six ministers of the Confederate States giving their reasons for supporting the Confederacy and titled, "An Address to Christians throughout the World" (see Fifteen Ministers; and Stanton).<sup>3</sup> *Southern Partisan* heralded the opinions of the Fifteen Ministers as a call "for a return to orthodoxy and an understanding of the cause for which Confederate Christians

fought," urging readers to, "find out how you can help in this crusade" (1).

The Fifteen Ministers summarize the major points of the theological war thesis, arguing for a Confederate Christian nation. They identify nineteenth-century Confederate leaders and troops as being Christian leaders and a Christian army, before asserting that the culture of Bible belt and religious conservatism in the South stem directly from the Christianity of the Confederate army. The Fifteen Ministers also demand that the Confederate battle flag be recognized as a Christian symbol, namely the Cross of St. Andrew (see also Slimp 12; Jennings). Quoting James Henley Thornwell, the Fifteen Ministers reassert that the Civil War was between Confederate Christianity, namely "the friends of order and regulated freedom" and Union "atheists, socialists, communists, red republicans, Jacobins" (qtd. in Fifteen Ministers 18). Soon after, League of the South member Thomas E. Woods published a detailed account of the theological Civil War argument in *Southern Partisan*. He asserted that the theological conflict is continuing today and that struggles against liberalism, big government and the New World Order comprise "Christendom's Last Stand" (26).

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These essays in the widely distributed magazine *Southern Partisan* mark a general acceptance of the theological war thesis amongst the Confederate heritage community. Indeed, such is the current prominence of the orthodox Christian Confederacy argument that the once less outspoken Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV) recently reprised the theological war thesis in their publication, *Confederate Veteran*. Alister C. Anderson, SCV Chaplain-in-Chief, wrote a series of essays forwarding these ideas, arguing that defending Confederate symbols is akin to fighting the Devil and that "the Sons of Confederate Veterans ... will not succeed in defending our Southern heritage until we as individuals submit to God's authority and offer Him ourselves, our souls and bodies as living sacrifices for His providential plans" ("Chaplain's Comments" vol. 4, 60).<sup>4</sup> Continuing in a subsequent issue, Anderson further stated: "My brother compatriots I ask you to remember that we are soldiers in the Army of God and are organized along the military lines of our soldier ancestors" ("Chaplain's Comments" vol. 6, 60). Succeeding Anderson as SCV Chaplain-in-Chief, John Weaver made national headlines when recounting his view that slavery is Biblically justified; also, his column in *Confederate Veteran*, quoting both Thornwell and Singer, has upheld the theological Civil War thesis and recently argued that "the Confederate flag represents biblical government" (J. Weaver "Chaplain's Comments" vol. 6, 64 and vol. 5; Firestone A14).

## Conclusion: Confederate Christian Nationalist Theology and the League of the South

In this paper we have argued that the neo-Confederate nationalist organization the League of the South advocates a Christian nationalist position and proposes a revived Confederate States of America. Examining the League of the South's rhetoric, in particular that by its president Michael Hill and director, Steven Wilkins, we have shown that this is founded upon the theological war thesis, an interpretation of the 1861-1865 US Civil War that understands the conflict to have been a struggle between the orthodox Christians of the Confederacy and the heretics of the Union. This belief originated within sections of the Presbyterian Church during the Civil War and the immediate postbellum period amongst some of its prominent clergymen including James Henley Thornwell, Benjamin Morgan Palmer and Robert Lewis Dabney. Largely marginalized, these ideas advocated that slavery was God-ordained and that opposition to slavery comprised, therefore, opposition to God.

Although some support for the theological war thesis was evident amongst Southern Agrarians such as Richard Weaver, it was during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s that C. Gregg Singer and Rousas John Rushdoony drew upon nineteenth-century Presbyterian precedents to again argue that the Civil War was a religious struggle. Academic reappraisal of the Presbyterian theologians, in particular Thornwell, followed in the 1980s and 1990s with the work of Eugene Genovese and James Oscar Farmer, Jr. With the theological war thesis gaining attention in both academic and Christian Reconstructionist venues, some proponents began to engage with those interested in Confederate heritage. One such individual was Steven Wilkins who restated the theological interpretation of the Civil War in numerous publications in the late 1980s and 1990s and became a founding director of the League of the South when the organization was inaugurated in 1994. By the turn of the twenty-first century, therefore, this once peripheral interpretation of the Civil War as a theological struggle between orthodox Christian Confederate states and heretical Union states has gained credibility and adherents, becoming intertwined with wider Confederate heritage and conservative Christian opinion. Consequently, groups as diverse as the Chalcedon Foundation, Sons of Confederate Veterans and, as we have concentrated upon here, the League of the South, now advocate that the US Civil War was a theological war.

## Notes

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- 1 The Presbyterian Church split in 1837 into "Old School" and "New School," the more conservative and doctrinal "Old School" becoming most prominent in the South (see, *inter alia*, Genovese, "Religion"; F.J. Smith; Richards).
- 2 David Brion Davis's 1995 review of Genovese's recent assessments of the South in the *New York Review of Books* elicited a strong response from Genovese (see Kreyling). Farmer's book about Thornwell won the Brewer Prize of the American Society of Church History.
- 3 Writing during the Civil War, Stanton states this "Address" was signed by ninety-six ministers. The Fifteen Ministers, writing in 1996, state that ninety-eight ministers signed the 1863 "Address."
- 4 *Confederate Veteran* publishes six issues each year. Each issue is listed as a volume (1-6). Thus the magazine currently numbers its editions vol. 4, 1999; vol. 6, 1999, etc. No months are given as publication dates.

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Appendix

Original publication date	Author	Title	Date of Initial Reprint	Publisher
1860	Benjamin Morgan Palmer	<i>The Theology of Prayer</i>	1980	Sprinkle Publications
1875	Benjamin Morgan Palmer	<i>The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell</i>	1974	Banner of Truth Trust
1876	Benjamin Morgan Palmer & J. W. Alexander	<i>The Family in its Civil and Churchly Aspects</i>	1981	Sprinkle Publications
1875	James Henley Thornwell	<i>The Collected Works of James Henley Thornwell</i> (4 vols.)	1974	Banner of Truth Trust

1876	William W. Bennett	<i>A Narrative of the Great Revival which Prevailed in the Southern Armies</i>	1989	Sprinkle Publications
1887	J. William Jones	<i>The Memorial Volume of Jefferson Davis</i>	1993	Sprinkle Publications
1887	J. William Jones	<i>Christ in the Camp or Religion in the Confederate Army</i>	1986	Sprinkle Publications
1906	J. William Jones	<i>The Life and Letters of Gen. Robert E. Lee</i>	1986	Sprinkle Publications
1866	Robert Lewis Dabney	<i>The Life and Campaigns of Lieut.-Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson</i>	1975	Sprinkle Publications
1867	Robert Lewis Dabney	<i>A Defense of Virginia and through her of the South</i>	1991	Sprinkle Publications
1870	Robert Lewis Dabney	<i>Evangelical Eloquence: A Course of Lectures on Preaching</i>	1999	Banner of Truth Trust
1871	Robert Lewis Dabney	<i>Systematic Theology</i>	1996	Banner of Truth Trust

1890	Robert Lewis Dabney	<i>Discussions</i> Vol. 1 <i>Theological and</i> <i>Evangelical</i>	1982	Sprinkle Publications
1890	Robert Lewis Dabney	<i>Discussions</i> Vol. 1 <i>Theological and</i> <i>Evangelical</i>	1967	Banner of Truth Trust
1891	Robert Lewis Dabney	<i>Discussions</i> Vol. 2 <i>Evangelical</i>	1982	Sprinkle Publications
1891	Robert Lewis Dabney	<i>Discussions</i> Vol. 2 <i>Evangelical</i>	1982	Banner of Truth Trust
1892	Robert Lewis Dabney	<i>Discussions</i> Vol. 3 <i>Philosophical</i>	1996	Sprinkle Publications
1892	Robert Lewis Dabney	<i>Discussions</i> Vol. 3 <i>Philosophical</i>	1982	Banner of Truth Trust
1897	Robert Lewis Dabney	<i>Discussions</i> Vol. 4 <i>Secular</i>	1994	Sprinkle Publications
1897	Robert Lewis Dabney	<i>The Practical</i> <i>Philosophy</i>	1984	Sprinkle Publications
1999	Robert Lewis Dabney	<i>Discussions</i> Vol. 5 <i>Miscellaneous</i>	1999	Sprinkle Publications
1898	Robert Lewis Dabney	<i>Christ Our</i> <i>Penal Substitute</i>	1985	Sprinkle Publications

1898	Robert Lewis Dabney & Jonathan Dickinson	<i>The Five Points of Calvinism</i>	1992	Sprinkle Publications
1903	Thomas Cary Johnson	<i>The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney</i>	1977	Banner of Truth Trust
1906	Thomas Cary Johnson	<i>The Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer</i>	1987	Banner of Truth Trust
1867	Judith B. McGuire	<i>Diary of a Southern Refugee During the War</i>	1996	Sprinkle Publications
1868	Alexander Stephens	<i>A Constitutional View of the War Between the States, its Causes, Character, Conduct and Results</i>	1994	Sprinkle Publications
1888	Thomas Nelson Page	<i>Two Little Confederates</i>	1994	Sprinkle Publications
1891	Thomas Nelson Page	<i>Among the Camps</i>	1995	Sprinkle Publications
1891	Mary Anna Jackson	<i>The Life and Letters of Stonewall Jackson</i>	1995	Sprinkle Publications

1893	Susan Pendleton Lee	<i>Memoirs of William Nelson Pendleton, Rector of Latimer Parish, Lexington, Virginia; Brigadier-General C.S.A., Chief of Artillery</i>	1991	Sprinkle Publications
1895	Mary L. Williamson	<i>A Confederate Trilogy for Young Readers</i>	1989	Sprinkle Publications
1895	Joseph T. Derry	<i>Story of the Confederate States</i>	1996	Sprinkle Publications
1901	Charles L. C. Minor	<i>The Real Lincoln: From the Testimony of his Contemporaries</i>	1992	Sprinkle Publications
1910	Randolph H. McKim	<i>A Soldier's Recollections: Leaves from the Diary of a Young Confederate</i>	1996	Sprinkle Publications
1911	Henry Alexander White	<i>Southern Presbyterian Leaders</i>	2000	Banner of Truth Trust

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